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William Henry Venable

AN APPRECIATION

Read before The Cincinnati Schoolmasters Club
October 9, 1920
with
Selections from the Author's Works

1921

APR 13 1921

"Thrice-happy City, dearest to my heart,
Who, showering benison upon her own,
Endows her opulent material mart
With lavish purchase from each ransacked zone,
Yet ne'er forgot exchange of rarer kind,
By trade-winds from all ports of Wisdom blown—
Imperishable merchandise of Mind:
Man may not live by bread alone,
But every word of God shall be made known!"

—*Cincinnati: A Civic Ode*

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WILLIAM HENRY VENABLE

WILLIAM HENRY VENABLE,—educator, historian, novelist, poet,—son of William and Hannah (Baird) Venable, was born April 29, 1836, on a farm not far from Waynesville, Warren County, Ohio. His ancestry on the paternal side was English, remotely Norman, while on the mother's side it was Scotch-English, with a qualifying strain of Dutch. His father, William Venable, was a Quaker and an abolitionist, and was, successively, a surveyor, a teacher, and a farmer.

In 1843 the family moved to a farm near Ridgeville, a hamlet located about seven miles north of Lebanon, Ohio, within a short distance of the present "Venable Station." Here, amid conditions only one remove from those of pioneer life, the subject of this sketch passed the formative years of his boyhood.

Stimulated by a home environment of books and culture, the ambitious youth early outgrew the limits of learning in the Ridgeville country school, and, eager in the pursuit of higher education, he sought the advantages of collegiate training in the South-Western State Normal School, at Lebanon, Ohio, where he rapidly acquired an academic knowledge of science, language, literature, and history, soon winning distinction by his versatile scholarship.

While yet in his teens Mr. Venable was a frequent contributor to local newspapers and he began the important historical investigations which later established his reputation as the foremost authority in all that pertains to the literary annals of the Ohio Valley.

After six years of experience as student and teacher in the South-Western State Normal School, Mr. Venable was called to the principalship of Vernon County Academy, Vernon, Indiana, which he conducted for about a year. During his residence in the Hoosier State he took an active part in educational affairs and was one of the editors of the Indiana School Journal.

Mr. Venable was married on December 30, 1861, to Miss Mary Ann Vater, of Indianapolis, and in September of the following year he removed to Cincinnati, where he entered upon a wider field of professional labor in the famous Chickering Institute, a classical and scientific academy with which he was connected for nearly a quarter of a century, and of which, in 1881, he became the principal and proprietor. Disposing of his interest in this school in 1886, he devoted the next three years to the completion of long-delayed literary undertakings and to lecturing in many towns and cities in Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia. His services as a public speaker were in constant demand, the most popular of his lectures during this period being the addresses entitled "Down South Before the War" and "The Coming Man," and the celebrated dramatic impersonation, "Tom Tad, or the Humor and Pathos of Boy Life." From 1889 to 1900 he was engaged in public educational work in Cincinnati, where, in addition to his far-sighted constructive labors as head of the department of English, first in Hughes and later in Walnut Hills High School, he exercised a far-reaching influence on educational ideals and methods through the publication of a volume of pedagogical essays entitled "Let Him First Be a Man," and of a series of textbooks in English poetry, which for more than twenty years have been an inspiring aid to teachers in thousands of American schools.

After his retirement from active professional life, in 1900, Mr. Venable devoted his energies exclusively to literature, producing many important works in prose and in verse. The wide-ranging list of his published volumes includes the following titles: A School History of the United States, 1872; June on the Miami, and Other Poems, 1872; The School Stage, 1873; The Amateur Actor, 1874; Dramas and Dramatic Scenes, 1874; The Teacher's Dream, 1881; Melodies of the Heart, Songs of Freedom and Faith, and Other Poems, 1885; Footprints of the Pioneers, 1888; The Teacher's Dream, and Other Songs of School Days, 1889; Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley, 1891; John Hancock, Educator, 1892; Let Him First Be a Man, and Other Essays, 1894; Poems of William Haines Lytle, edited, with Memoir, 1894; The Last Flight, 1894; Tales from Ohio History, 1896; Selections from the Poems of Burns, 1898; Selections from the Poems of Byron, 1898; Selections from the Poems of Wordsworth, 1898; Santa Claus and the Black Cat, 1898; A Dream of Empire, or The House of Blennerhassett, 1901; Tom Tad, 1902; Saga of the Oak, and Other Poems, 1904; Cincinnati: A Civic Ode, 1907; Floridian Sonnets, 1909; A Buckeye Boyhood, 1911; June on the Miami: An Idyl, 1912; A History of Christ Church, Cincinnati, 1917.

Mr. Venable spent his entire life, excepting for a single year, in Ohio, where with tongue and pen he devoted himself to the higher interests of his time, working especially to promote the cause of liberal education and literary culture. He was identified with many teachers' institutes and associations and he was a member of numerous educational and literary societies. He was the organizer and the first president of the Cincinnati Society for Political Education, 1880; the first president of the Teachers' Club of Cincinnati, 1891; president of the Western Association of Writers, 1895; an honorary member of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio; a life member of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society; an honorary member of the Cincinnati Schoolmasters Club and of the Literary Club of Cincinnati; and a member of the Authors' Club, of London, England.

As a public speaker Mr. Venable rendered notable service to the State, delivering historical and commemorative addresses on many important civic occasions, including the Jefferson County Centennial, in 1897, the Lebanon Centennial, in 1902, and the Ohio Centennial, in 1903.

In recognition of his great and varied contributions to the higher life of the community and nation, Mr. Venable, in 1864, received from De Pauw University the honorary degree of Master of Arts; in 1886 he received from Ohio University the degree of Doctor of Laws; and in 1917 he received from the University of Cincinnati the highest honor within its gift, the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.

Mr. Venable's literary activity ceased only with his death, which occurred on July 6, 1920, the author being then in his eighty-fifth year. Among the unpublished manuscripts left with his son and literary executor are a revised edition of his "Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley," a volume of essays and addresses entitled "The Utility of the Ideal," and a complete edition of his collected poems.

No sketch of the life of William Henry Venable is complete which does not record his conspicuous achievement in history, fiction, and verse. Few books have exerted a wider influence than his "History of the United States," which for many years was a standard textbook in schools throughout the country. Referring to this volume President Hayes wrote: "With such textbooks our boys ought to be wiser than their fathers, and with half the labor." Mr. Venable's greatest historical work, "Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley," is recognized by all authorities as the most important book ever produced relating to the rise and early growth of literary and educational institutions in the Middle-West. His popular romance, "A Dream of Empire, or The House of Blennerhassett,"—the one great novel of the Burr-Blennerhassett episode,—not only enjoys the distinction of having been a "best seller," of its day, but has been pronounced "one of the strongest, most gracefully constructed, and most captivating of modern historical romances." Equal praise has been accorded to the author's "Tom Tad," which, in the opinion of the Troy (N. Y.) Times, "deserves to be ranked with Mark Twain's 'Tom Sawyer' and 'Huckleberry Finn.'"

Numerous and important as are his writings in many departments of prose literature, it is as a poet that Mr. Venable is most widely known. Conspicuous among his earlier poems is "The Teacher's Dream," which for more than sixty years has held a secure place in our national literature as "one of the household and schoolhouse lays of the people." Representative of his later work is the famous lyric, "My Catbird." This remarkable production, described by an eminent critic as "the laureate song of our universal songster," was characterized by the poet Coates Kinney as "the most completely inspired poem of its kind in the English language;" while Mr. Venable's charming pastoral, "June on the Miami," has been hailed as "a worthy companion of the glorious winter piece of Whittier —'Snow-Bound,'—as faithful a description of the month it celebrates in Ohio as that is a domestic home picture of winter in Massachusetts."

Speaking of the author's verse in general, and in particular of the volume "Floridian Sonnets," Miss Edith M. Thomas, the foremost of living American poets and a leading representative of the great Ohio group, pays deathless tribute to Mr. Venable's genius in the following words:

"William Henry Venable was rich in earthly years and in the garner of the excellent work, his bequest to us. He indeed 'knew to sing and build the lofty rhyme;' to '*sing*,' as witness many a lovely lyric that 'simply tells the most heart-easing things,' and 'to *build*,' as truly, 'the lofty *rhyme*.' One finds the former, in many a direct human appeal, in his 'Saga of the Oak,' and the latter in his 'Floridian Sonnets,' where the movement of the verse is like a grand adagio music,—or like a structure built, magically, by inevitable Thought itself, as much as by the use of the 'inevitable *word*.' The greatness of the soul behind the work is at all times apparent. 'The Common Man,' 'Sursum Corda,' 'Conscious Evolution,' are the output of a wide-sweeping consciousness, alive both to the human and the divine. Herbert Spencer would have rejoiced in 'The Unknowable,' and 'Toleration' could go straight to Marcus Aurelius. The elegiac sonnets (only they have some mournful triumphant movement—like Beethoven's *March*)—to Coates Kinney, are

of the noblest that Friendship and Death have called forth in our English.—Would that the voice of comradely greeting, of grateful appraisal, might follow and reach this true singer of fair Ohio, whom not only she must mourn, but also America herself, with a doubt if he has left his peer in those fields of song where his Muse adventured, with so happy a conquest of all therein outspread. I am thinking of 'June on the Miami,' and of many a briefer idyllic presentment of scenes to which my heart is no stranger."

While listening to this brief sketch of the life of William Henry Venable, those of you who knew him personally must have been struck by the contrast between the physical frailty of the man and the imposing grandeur of his work. And in fact his conception of life was quite a contrast to that of most men. Life, to most of us, is a continual struggle against the forces without and the passions within; at times we prevail only to succumb, again we fail only to renew the combat. On the grave of a thousand disappointed hopes we devise new schemes, only to have them pass away, even as the flower of the field, or as the wind passing over the grave of man; there only the contest ends, there only all distinctions are leveled, making the whole world kin.

How different was the conception of life to William Henry Venable. Instead of the dominant force impelling to action being a divine discontent, to him it was an implicit confidence in the Love of the Creator and the loveliness of His works; instead of an atmosphere of doubt and discord, his life was permeated by calm serenity and fervid faith. His was a spirit so gentle and a view so lofty that the strife and struggles of the flesh could not endure. So sweet and soothing was his presence that one felt a touch of that harmony which pervades the sanctuary of nature; his indeed was the peace that passeth understanding.

He who wrote "The Teacher's Dream" must have realized to a wonderful degree the hope that thrills every teacher—the hope to live in the hearts of his pupils. Few realize as did he the glory which comes with the knowledge that the seed implanted in the furrows of Time is quickening into life and happiness.

How many of us must acclaim him *rabbi*—meaning "my teacher,"—a term used by the Hebrew of old to express the highest degree of love and reverence which one being may bear another.

And even in those last years when the sun of life retreats "and evening shadows round us hover," even then were his days filled with joy and gladness. Ever striving to "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God," he viewed long before his material sun had set the dawning of that day in which the light of truth, brighter than the visible sun, shall encircle the earth. And his life was thrilled with its warmth and gladness. Truly his memory shall be a blessing to them that cherish it.

THE TEACHER'S DREAM

The weary teacher sat alone,
  While twilight gathered on;
And not a sound was heard around,
  The boys and girls were gone.

The weary teacher sat alone,
  Unnerved and pale was he;
Bowed by a yoke of care he spoke
  In sad soliloquy:

"Another round, another round
  Of labor thrown away,
Another chain of toil and pain
  Dragged through a tedious day.

"Of no avail is constant zeal,
  Love's sacrifice is loss,
The hopes of morn, so golden, turn,
  Each evening, into dross.

"I squander on a barren field
  My strength, my life, my all;
The seeds I sow will never grow,
  They perish where they fall."

He sighed, and low upon his hands
  His aching brow he prest,
And like a spell upon him fell
  A soothing sense of rest.

Ere long he lifted up his face,
  When, on his startled view,
The room by strange and sudden change
  To vast proportions grew!

It seemed a senate-hall, and one
  Addressed a listening throng;
Each burning word all bosoms stirred,
  Applause rose loud and long.

The wildered teacher thought he knew
  The speaker's voice and look,
"And for his name," said he, "the same
  Is in my record-book."

The stately senate-hall dissolved,
  A church rose in its place,
Wherein there stood a man of God
  Dispensing words of grace.

And though he heard the solemn voice,
  And saw the beard of gray,
The teacher's thought was strangely wrought:
  "My yearning heart to-day

"Wept for this youth whose wayward will
  Against persuasion strove,
Compelling force, love's last resource,
  To establish laws of love."

The church, a phantom, vanished soon;
  What apparition then?
In classic gloom of alcoved room
  An author plied his pen.

"My idlest lad!" the master said,
  Filled with a new surprise,
"Shall I behold *his* name enrolled
  Among the great and wise?"

The vision of a cottage home
  Was now through tears descried:
A mother's face illumed the place
  Her influence sanctified.

"A miracle! a miracle!
  This matron, well I know,
Was but a wild and careless child
  Not half an hour ago.

"Now when she to her children speaks
  Of duty's golden rule,
Her lips repeat, in accents sweet,
  My words to her at school."

Dim on the teacher's brain returned
  The humble school-room old;
Upon the wall did darkness fall,
  The evening air was cold.

"A dream!" the sleeper, waking, said,
  Then paced along the floor,
And, whistling slow and soft and low,
  He locked the schoolhouse door.

His musing heart was reconciled
  To love's divine delays:
"The bread forth cast returns at last,
  Lo, after many days!"

1856

MY CATBIRD

A Capriccio

Nightingale I never heard,
Nor the skylark, poet's bird;
But there is an aether-winger
So surpasses every singer,
(Though unknown to lyric fame,)
That at morning, or at nooning,
When I hear his pipe a-tuning,
Down I fling Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth,—
What are all their songs of birds worth?
All their soaring
Souls' outpouring?
When my Mimus Carolinensis,
(That's his Latin name,)
When my warbler wild commences
Song's hilarious rhapsody,
Just to please himself and me!

Primo Cantante!
Scherzo! Andante!
Piano, pianissimo!
Presto, prestissimo!
Hark! are there nine birds or ninety and nine?
And now a miraculous gurgling gushes
Like nectar from Hebe's Olympian bottle,
The laughter of tune from a rapturous throttle!
Such melody must be a hermit-thrush's!
But that other caroler, nearer,
Outrivaling rivalry with clearer
Sweetness incredibly fine!
Is it oriole, redbird, or bluebird,
Or some strange, un-Auduboned new bird?
All one, sir, both this bird and that bird,
The whole flight are all the same catbird!
The whole visible and invisible choir you see
On one lithe twig of yon green tree.
Flitting, feathery Blondel!
Listen to his rondel!
To his lay romantical!
To his sacred canticle!
Hear him lilting,

See him tilting
His saucy head and tail, and fluttering
While uttering
All the difficult operas under the sun
Just for fun;
Or in tipsy revelry,
Or at love devilry,
Or, disdaining his divine gift and art,
Like an inimitable poet
Who captivates the world's heart
And don't know it.
Hear him lilt!
See him tilt!

Then suddenly he stops,
Peers about, flirts, hops,
As if looking where he might gather up
The wasted ecstasy just spilt
From the quivering cup
Of his bliss overrun.
Then, as in mockery of all
The tuneful spells that e'er did fall
From vocal pipe, or evermore shall rise,
He snarls, and mews, and flies.

A DIAMOND

Upon the breast of stolid earth
  This immemorial stone,
A jewel of Golconda's worth,
 In sovran beauty shone.

My lady for a moment bore
  The gem upon her brow,
A moment on her bosom wore—
  'Tis worth the Orient now.

FOUNDERS OF OHIO

April, 1888

The footsteps of a hundred years
  Have echoed since o'er Braddock's Road
Bold Putnam and the Pioneers
  Led History the way they strode.

On wild Monongahela stream
  They launched the Mayflower of the West,
A perfect State their civic dream,
  A new New World their pilgrim quest.

When April robed the Buckeye trees
  Muskingum's bosky shore they trod;
They pitched their tents and to the breeze
  Flung freedom's banner, thanking God.

As glides the Oyo's solemn flood
  So fleeted their eventful years;
Resurgent in their children's blood,
  They still live on—the Pioneers.

Their fame shrinks not to names and dates
  On votive stone, the prey of time:
Behold where monumental States
  Immortalize their lives sublime!

SONG

(From "June on the Miami")

I know 'tis late, but let me stay,
For night is tenderer than day;
Sweet love, dear love, I can not go,
Dear love, sweet love, I love thee so.
The birds in leafy hiding sleep;
Shrill katydids their vigil keep;
The woodbine breathes a fragrance rare
Upon the dewy, languid air;
The fireflies twinkle in the vale,
The river looms in moonshine pale,
And look! a meteor's dreamy light
Streams mystic down the solemn night!
Ah, life glides swift, like that still fire,—
How soon our throbbing joys expire!
Who can be sure the present kiss
Is not his last? Make all of this.
I know 'tis late, sweet love, I know,
Dear love, sweet love, I love thee so.

Fantastic mist obscurely fills
The hollows of Miami hills;
Heardst thou? I heard, or fear I heard,
Vague twitters of some wakeful bird;
The wingèd hours are swift indeed!
Why makes the jealous morn such speed?
This rose thou wearst, may I not take
For passionate remembrance' sake?
Press with thy lips its crimson heart;
Yes, blushing rose, we must depart;
A rose can not return a kiss—
I pay its due with this, and this;
The stars grow faint, they soon will die,
But love faints not nor fails.—Good-bye!
Unhappy joy—delicious pain—
We part in love, we meet again!
Good-bye!—the morning dawns—I go;
Dear love, sweet love, I love thee so.

THE COMMON MAN

Who is the Common Man? By whom defined?
How his ingredient nature estimate?
By what alembic differentiate
The universal from the special kind,
Or what potential slumbers in each mind?
The great how little, and the smallest great!
Was not the Savior to the middle rate
By the proud rulers of the world assigned?
All men are men; no man is more: bound all
In one democracy of blood, the same;
Coequal heritors of sense and soul;
Whirled round diurnal on this earthly ball,
Resolved to common dust from which they came,
Brethren alike in origin and goal.

SURSUM CORDA

Here on this barren fragment unreclaimed
Of coral reef o'ersurged by tidal brine,
Shifting each fluctuant hour its border-line,
I did not think to hear, loud-clarion-famed,
Or whispered to my solitude unblamed,
Rumor of Politics; but o'er the shine
Of watery waste, and continental fine,
Sounded the Nations and great names were named!
Then I rejoiced with an exceeding awe
And the religious rapture patriots know,
Who in their love of country love the Race,
Enjoining equal privilege and law!
A Citizen! a Man! how can I go
Away from Home, beyond my People's place?

"THOUGHTS THAT BREATHE"

(From Mr. Venable's prose writings)

"There is no color and no sex in freedom. Give every race, and every individual of every race, an equal chance,—a square deal,—the glorious liberty of the sons of God."

"Freedom is the atmosphere and sunshine of the soul, vitalizing and developing its healthy growth and perfect flowering, as physical air and light unfold and beautify the rose."

"Individual peoples, and individual persons, seem to lead the advance of civilization, as particular waves precede the general tide. But the tide comes in at last."

"The reign of Thor is drawing slowly but surely to its close. 'Knock-out arguments' and 'shot-gun policies' shall go to the museum with the rack and the iron boot."

"That which we call 'agitation,' or discussion, whether by tongue or type, is the true means of modern warfare."

"Man is distinguished above the beast, and the learned man above the boor, by the use of language. The mind is his arsenal,—his ammunition, a vocabulary. His squadrons are the serried sciences; his ranks, embattled ideas; his banners, far-streaming truth."

"No person is more likely to be 'behind the times' than he who is ignorant of the great ideas and achievements of antiquity."

"Perhaps a man's most original thoughts are those he is least conscious of evolving. . . . . Originality is the vitalization of the mind's food; it is the last process of mental digestion."

"Words are deeds. He who speaks well, or writes well, does service as practical as the sowing of grain, the steering of a ship, or the curing of a wound."

"Culture aims to secure every true, good, and beautiful thing, mortal and immortal, to which man can aspire."

"Lincoln said the Civil War developed him. Browning said, 'Italy was my university.' He who is docile, resolute, and industrious, whether in school or out of school, will attain."

"Academic training is at best an apprenticeship, not a mastery."

"Is not education the supreme science of life, and conduct its application?"

"Life has one springtime, one seed time, and no harvest can be gathered where no field has been tilled."

"Here in Ohio are Eldorado and the Golden Gate."

"Some energy, divine or human, has worked hitherto, and still works, in the 'paragon of animals,' for his melioration."

"Travail goes to the birth of Minerva,—throes of the brain."

"Every earnest soul of vast purpose sooner or later enters into the gloom of its own peculiar Gethsemane."

"There is a noble discontent which sometimes stirs a community to great action."

"Acts of Congress and decisions of courts are only marks upon the barometer scale of Popular Opinion, and serve to indicate the state of the intellectual and moral atmosphere."

"The brick and stone do not make the cathedral; a great imagination builds it."

"Money is, at best, rather a fertilizer than a fruit."

"That which we call the ideal is the only eternal actual. Is not the body the simulacrum and the invisible soul the real existence?"

"Every literature is indebted to every other literature; all authors are borrowers and lenders; and the commerce of mind fills the world with its best riches—the intellectual wealth of nations."

"A novel or a poem which is worthless in Ohio can not be good in Massachusetts or in Alaska, though it may be marketable."

"They who are young keep the old alive and give them motives. How miserable the community which is not continually rejuvenated by the blood of its best."

"Be patient and wait! Yes, but also, be impatient and move on. Evolution, like the Kingdom of Heaven, is not lo, here, or lo, there, but it is within you."

"Why do we go to school, asks a wise man, but that we may not need always to go to school?"

"Activity is the price of culture; the intellect must be kept alive by the breath of the will."

"A favorite Ohio idea is crystalized in that saying of Garfield: 'A log in the woods, with Mark Hopkins seated on it, is a great university'."

"He who teaches arithmetic well has taught all mathematics by anticipation. Who teaches the First Reader rightly has given his pupil a clue to Shakespeare, to Herodotus, to Confucius."

"What is needed is the juice of the book, not the husk."

"All that is attempted or done in giving tasks, hearing recitations, advising or restraining pupils, should aim at the golden center of the target—conduct."

"Especially would I impress upon every child the sentiment that the vote is sacred. Not even in play should the boy stuff the ballot-box or mock the privilege of anticipated citizenship."

"Turn to the map of Ohio and note what it recalls and suggests of significant events and mighty men. What is the name of the first county organized in the state? Washington. The second? Hamilton. The third? Wayne. The fourth? Adams. And the fifth, what? Jefferson. Let your eye travel from county to county and you read such shining names as Warren, Franklin, Putnam, Madison, Monroe, Green, Knox, Jackson, Harrison. Finds the ambitious boy no meaning, no moral, in his geography book? Its very names inspire, and the dry page becomes, to intelligent brains and heroic hearts, a very holy bible of patriotism and manliness."